

Literature Circles

Overview

A literature circle is a student-led group that meets to have engaged discussions about a selection that members know intimately. Group members collaborate in a dynamic process that involves reading, recording responses in a journal, predicting, and questioning. As a component of a comprehensive balanced literacy approach, literature circles provide research-based



“When you implement literature circles in your classroom, you engage students in 21st century skills as you improve reading performance.”

—Susan S. Lehr

instruction for vocabulary and skill development. The structured process of literature circles results in students taking ownership of the text and improving their reading comprehension. The teacher sets the group’s academic goals and models instruction. Over time, students become skillful at performing specific roles during literature circle meetings. As they discuss, students support one another in achieving their learning goals.

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Successful Literature Circles

Build these key characteristics into your literature circles instruction.

- ▶ **Choice** Students in literature circles often resemble enthusiastic members of a book club they chose to join. Guide your students to make suitable reading choices based on their interests, their background knowledge, age-appropriate content, and your classroom goals. While choice is a critical factor for motivating and engaging students in the reading process, teachers guide choices based on their instructional decisions for skills and strategies. Teachers also plan how to place students into groups and direct students to appropriate levels of texts.
- ▶ **Benchmarking** Consider when to select leveled text for book talks, how to place students into discussion groups, how to match readers with leveled text, and which timelines to establish. Reading A-Z offers running records and reading comprehension quizzes for assessing the independent and instructional levels of your students.
- ▶ **Modeling and Support** The goal of this instruction is to empower students to guide their own learning as they are assigned to literature circles and given independent work. Introduce the process of literature circles during whole class instruction. Then model the behaviors needed for each role that students will take on. Conduct guided practice while monitoring and providing feedback.
- ▶ **Engagement and Process** Excellent book discussions are characterized by students working individually and with the group. Independently, students read, reflect, and prepare for group interaction. In the group, they engage in meaningful conversations, maintain a focus on the text, and gain deepened comprehension of their reading. To achieve this high level of engagement and quality outcomes, teachers act as facilitators who guide students through a structured process, discussed further in Facilitating Literature Circles.

The Teacher's Role

When teachers use Reading A-Z Literature Circles for instruction, their role is that of a facilitator and their goal is to release learning to students. To introduce the process, choose the Model Lesson for either fiction or nonfiction and follow the instructional plan. In both, you distribute the Literature Circles Role Descriptions. Each has a student-friendly explanation of the skills and strategies for a role and the accompanying Journal. Model how to use the Journal to record information for the role and allow students to practice. When the process is still unfamiliar, it is best to support students and monitor their work for accuracy and completion. After the initial roles and strategies instruction, plan a literature circle meeting of about 15 minutes. Specify the number of meetings groups will have for the selection they chose, and have them work together to divide the whole selection into assignments for the planned number of meetings. Have students use the Reading Assignment and Role Planner as a tool.

Remind students that while all members have questioning and predicting roles for each meeting, they take turns for other roles. Then guide students as they discuss which roles will be needed for the selection and which specific roles they will choose for the first meeting. To gain proficiency in skills and strategies, students do not repeat roles during the literature circle meetings for a selection, but choose different ones.

Now, students read their chosen selection, which may be a story, article, play, or other text. Then they predict and question as they read. They use their Reading A-Z Literature Circles Journals to record their responses to the selection in their individual roles. During the discussion, the teacher circulates and coaches groups as they establish a collaborative relationship. To assess groups and individual students, use the Observation Checklist and plan further instruction based on the results. As needed, reteach and guide practice until you observe that students perform the roles skillfully during literature circle discussions.

Planning Time and Instruction

When observers look in on successful literature circles, they see empowered students who freely and authentically exchange ideas. These high-quality interactions are the result of a specific process that teachers facilitate. One step in the process is planning the time span for a literature circles unit, usually two to three days in primary grades and three to five days in intermediate grades. The recommended length of each group meeting is 25–35 minutes. Teachers often schedule up to five rounds of Reading A–Z Literature Circles per year. Providing literature is another part of the planning. Allow groups to make their choices from selections at independent or instructional reading levels.

Another planning step is identifying the skills and strategies for instruction based on curriculum maps, district expectations, and instructional standards. Teachers examine the fiction or nonfiction selections that students have chosen and discover rich opportunities for teaching reading skills and strategies. With these learning goals in mind, teachers plan lessons to guide students as they

learn and apply those skills and strategies. Whole group instruction for the roles students will choose, along with modeling and guided practice, is an essential part of the process. During guided practice, students record notes in their Journals and then refer to them when they act in their specific roles during the group discussion. Through the process, students come to understand that their group's success in literature circles depends on how they as individuals perform in a role.

If your class schedule allows more time, let students plan longer assignments. Students may be grouped by their interest in a particular topic. All students will benefit if you instruct using the Model Lessons for Fiction and Nonfiction, and the accompanying Role Descriptions, Journals, and Bookmarks. For fiction, the Model Lesson selection is *Marcus Loses Patches* (Level M); for nonfiction, the selection is *Barack Obama* (Level S). Have students reflect how using these tools will make their discussions more successful.

Guiding Choice Through Book Talks

Literature circles are collaborative and student-centered. A group of students negotiates to choose literature they will read and discuss together. The teacher guides the choice by gathering information about students through techniques such as interest surveys. After students choose a genre or topic, the teacher selects from five to seven titles and presents them in book talks, which are one- to two-minute commercials for each selection. To allow time to place students into groups and prepare materials for distribution, present book talks at least two days before the first groups meet.

To prepare for book talks:

- Display a list of the selection titles in the classroom or post the list electronically.
- Have copies of the selections available for students to browse prior to choosing what they will read.
- Have students record their first, second, and third book choices on a sheet of paper.
- Use students' choices to guide decisions for placing students into groups. More than one group of students may be reading the same selection.



Roles in Literature Circles

Discussion Leader Role

One student acts in this role each time the group meets.

The Discussion Leader plays a key role. This student monitors the overall process that keeps the discussion moving. During the meeting, the Discussion Leader calls

on students in their specific roles and gives them the opportunity to share their ideas. Most importantly, this student makes sure everyone has a chance to participate.

Predictor and Questioner Roles

All group members will act in these roles for all types of text.

► **Predictor** In literature circles, students' own knowledge counts. Each student comes with prior experiences with text and topics and uses them to make predictions. Before reading, students make predictions by using the title, outside cover, and familiarity with the author. They also skim through the text. During reading, they will need to adjust their predictions when they encounter new information.

► **Questioner** Another dynamic engagement with text is questioning. Some questions have answers right in the text. Other questions stimulate deeper discussion because students have to draw conclusions or infer based on clues. Before and during reading, all students generate questions and share them during literature circle discussions.

Skill Master Roles

These roles emphasize reading strategies and skills for all selections.

► **Skill Master: Main Idea and Details** During reading, this Skill Master identifies the main idea and then finds key phrases and important facts to support it. Then the student shares the information with members of the group and invites them to add their ideas.

► **Skill Master: Compare and Contrast** This Skill Master pays attention to the similarities and differences between two or more key topics, ideas, or characters in the chosen selection. During the discussion, he or she helps group members connect and compare ideas.

► **Skill Master: Cause and Effect** This Skill Master analyzes the causes and effects of facts, concepts, and events. By sharing these connections during the literature circle discussion, this student leads group members to better understand story plots and factual events.

► **Skill Master: Sequence of Events** This Skill Master points out important events in the order they happen so that everyone understands the selection better. In this role, the student also discusses when two events happen at the same time or when the author narrates events out of order, as in a flashback.

Literary Roles

Individual group members choose these roles for both fiction and nonfiction selections.

- ▶ **Summarizer** This role requires a student to write the most important ideas in the selection. As members discuss the summary, they deepen their comprehension. The Summarizer uses techniques such as dividing the text into smaller portions and combining ideas.
- ▶ **Travel Tracker** The Travel Tracker identifies the setting, or where and when the action or events take place. In this role, a student must keep track of changes in the setting. The student also points out reasons that each setting is important. For example, a setting may cause the characters to take action or the setting itself may cause unexpected events.
- ▶ **Conflict Connector** In this role, a student focuses on how the author uses conflict to dramatize the central problem in the selection and how it engages the reader. The Conflict Connector recognizes that conflict is both a familiar part of everyday experience and a key element of an interesting story. By identifying the conflict, students deepen their understanding of the selection.
- ▶ **Character/People Tracker** This student focuses on how a character in fiction or a figure in nonfiction changes and develops over time. The Character/People Tracker helps others analyze the traits, feelings, and reactions that a character or person exhibits during the plot or in factual events. In this role, a student also leads members to use what they know about characters to draw conclusions about the theme.
- ▶ **Wordsmith** In this role, a student helps members appreciate how words make a text come alive. During the discussion, the Wordsmith prompts members to explore multiple meanings of words, construct word webs or concept maps, make connections with other words and texts, spot vivid verbs, and discuss why the author chose certain words.
- ▶ **Connector** The Connector records text-to-text, text-to-self, or text-to-world connections that come to mind during reading and shares them in the group discussion. The Connector also encourages other members to make their own connections.
- ▶ **Illustrator** The job of the Illustrator is to create and present an illustration that the group members interpret and discuss. The Illustrator prepares by selecting an important paragraph, scene, or other text to illustrate, such as an exciting action or the main idea with supporting details. After showing the illustration to the group and hearing the other members' comments, the Illustrator explains how the illustration connects to the selection.
- ▶ **Researcher** This student discovers additional information about the topic, idea, people, places, or things in the text. As the Researcher shares the findings, all students build background knowledge and contribute new ideas sparked by the research. The Researcher's contribution helps members realize that different authors may write about the same topic from different perspectives and for different purposes.
- ▶ **Literary Reactor** The Literary Reactor pays attention to the feelings he or she has while reading a fiction selection and to his or her opinions about what an author states in nonfiction selections. After the student shares his or her own reactions with the group, other members discuss theirs.
- ▶ **Theme Tracker** This student's job is to ask, "What is the big idea of the whole story?" During reading, the Theme Tracker thinks about the characters, action, and conflict. At the group meeting, this student states the lesson or big idea he or she discovered and discusses it with group members.

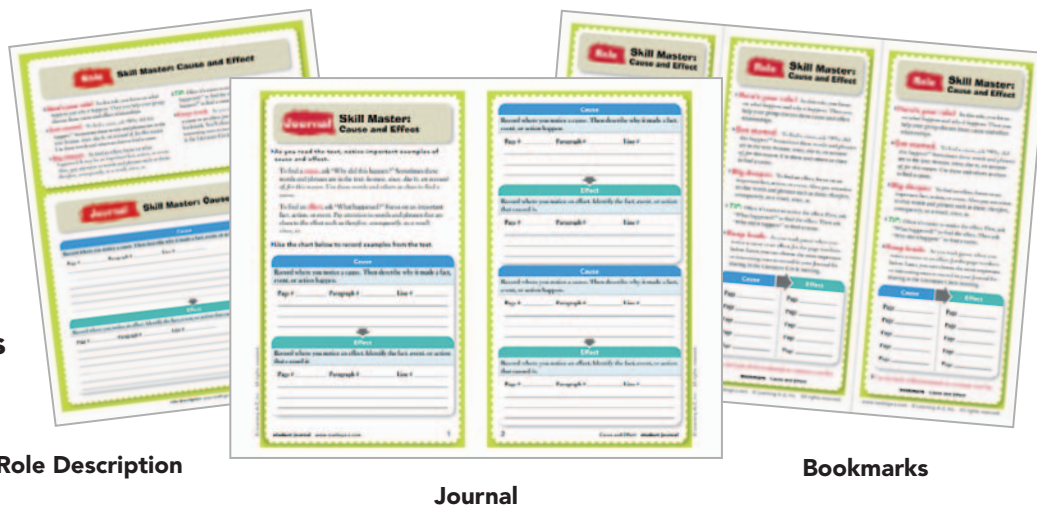
Facilitating Literature Circles

Tools for Literature Circles

► **Student Tools** In addition to the selection they are reading, students rely on other tools before, during, and after literature circle meetings. As an initial step in the process, each student assembles a Reading A–Z Literature Circles Journal. This booklet includes the Reading Assignment and Role Planner, a reference for tracking meeting times, reading assignments, and roles. The Journal also has pages for recording responses for specific roles. As students read, they refer to the Bookmarks for their roles. This tool has quick reminders of what they should look for as they read and places for jotting page numbers of examples they can write about in their Journals. Students bring their Journals to each meeting and use them during the discussion and when preparing for the next meeting.

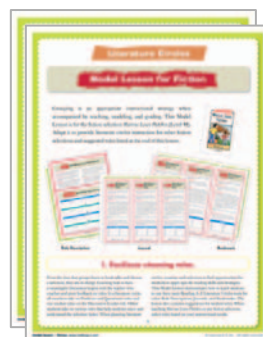
► **Model Lessons** A literature circle functions as a collaborative group in which members perform specific roles as they read and discuss both fiction and nonfiction selections. As students take on these jobs, they become more engaged in their reading and deepen their comprehension of the selection. Introduce roles and discuss them during whole class instruction. Two Model Lessons are provided to help you teach and model the roles, and they are accompanied by a wide variety of student models. The Model Lesson for Fiction is based on the selection *Marcus Loses Patches* (Level M), and the Model Lesson for Nonfiction is based on *Barack Obama* (Level S).

Student Tools

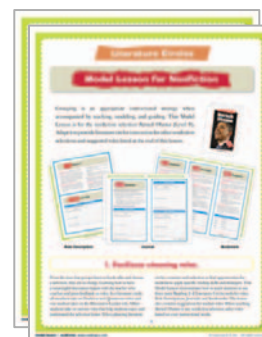


Model Lessons

Fiction Lesson



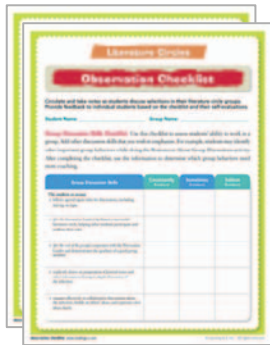
Nonfiction Lesson



More Tools for Literature Circles

► **Assessment** Assessment for Reading A–Z Literature Circles is also student-led. Students use the Self-Evaluations for assessing their own participation in group discussions. Prepare them by using the suggestions and activities in Facilitating Self-Evaluations. During group discussions, use the Observation Checklist to assess group participation and reading comprehension. Then plan reteaching and coaching based on the results.

Groups can continue to make meaning from literature circle selections by developing a concluding project, report, or presentation and sharing it with the class. Plan the activity so that it is an opportunity for students to apply critical thinking skills and gain deeper comprehension. Encourage them to revise their interpretations as they make new discoveries about the selection. The project can also be used for assessment.



Observation Checklist



Facilitating Self-Evaluations



Student Self-Evaluation

Forming Literature Circle Groups

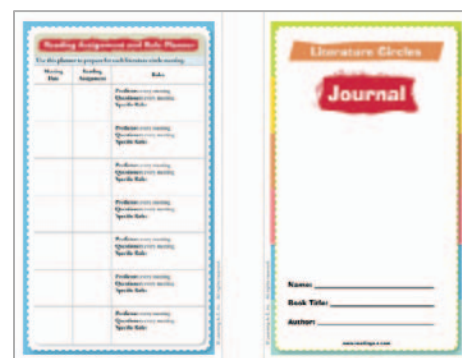
A literature circle discussion group has three or four members, a size that allows opportunities for individual participation and practice functioning in different roles. Teachers honor students' choices by grouping students according to their preferences from the book talks. Teachers' judgment also comes into play as they consider students' unique personalities, interests, and ability to function well in groups.

Plan ahead to provide groups with these materials:

- a copy of the selection for each student
- Role Description and Journal for each student for the roles needed for the current round of literature circles
- Bookmarks for the chosen roles
- Reading Assignment and Role Planner for each student

Participation in literature circles leads students to gain a deeper meaning from a selection. This dynamic process begins before reading as members make predictions, ask questions, and set a purpose for reading. During reading, individuals read for enjoyment and understanding, and

with the specific purpose of preparing for a role. At this time, students are using the Bookmarks and Journals to record page numbers, questions, and responses. After reading, they participate in group discussions and take turns acting in their roles by sharing questions, ideas, or connections from their Journals. Together, the group negotiates which roles members take on and the reading assignments for each meeting.



Journal Booklet Cover with Reading Assignment and Role Planner

The Literature Circles Routine

Reading A–Z Literature Circles provide teachers and students with everything they need for lively, engaged participation in literature circle meetings. In successful discussions, teachers guide students to follow the general process below. However, routines and processes vary in different classrooms. As your students gain experience, the process will become a seamless routine. Use this quick guide as you facilitate your literature circles.

1

Start with the Summary The Discussion Leader begins the meeting by asking the Summarizer to provide a brief summary of the selection read. Other group members add their own ideas about what was most important in the selection. Throughout the meeting, the Discussion Leader makes sure everyone has a chance to participate. All members use their Journals and the selection as key tools. (3 to 5 minutes)

4

Listen and Respond Students continue to actively discuss the ideas they hear from group members in their roles. They add ideas from their Journals and respond to others with their own insights. When they talk about their ideas, they use evidence from the selection as support. As the discussion winds down, the Discussion Leader asks if students have any unanswered questions to discuss. (7 to 10 minutes)

2

Predict and Question The Discussion Leader invites all group members to discuss predictions made in the last meeting and to share questions. The Discussion Leader also makes sure students talk about the author's purpose for writing the selection and the main message the author wants readers to know. (3 to 5 minutes)

5

Wrap It Up At the end of the discussion, the Discussion Leader asks everyone to check their Reading Assignment and Role Planner for the next meeting. Then, he or she asks members to make new predictions about the selection they are about to read. Finally, the Discussion Leader asks members to choose another role for the next meeting. Members select Journals and Bookmarks for their new roles. (3 to 5 minutes)

3

Perform the Roles Each group member acts in his or her role, referring to the Journal. The other members are active, responding and finding examples or evidence in the selection. Group members discuss the information and make connections. (1 to 3 minutes per role)

6

Prepare Now students prepare individually for the next meeting by reading the selection. They use the Bookmark to review what their job is and to jot key words and page numbers. They refer to the Bookmarks as they write in their Journals.